

THE DIGNITY AND 
 WORTH OF MAN.

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A SERMON

—DELIVERED BY—

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—AT THE —

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"Let each man think himself an act of God,
His mind a thought, his life a breath of God."—*Bailey*

"O rich and various man! thou palace of sight and sound, carrying in thy senses the morning and the night, and the unfathomable galaxy; in thy brain, the geometry of the city of God; in thy heart, the power of love and the realms of right and wrong!"
—*Emerson*.

"To the eye of Pure Reason what is man? A soul, a spirit and a divine apparition. Round his mysterious me there lies, under all those wool-rags, a garment of flesh contextured in the loom of Heaven; whereby he is revealed to his like, and dwells with them in union and division; and sees and fashions for himself a universe, with azure starry spaces, and long thousands of years. Deep-hidden is he under that strange garment, amid sounds and colors and forms, as it were, swathed in and inextricably overshadowed; yet it is sky-woven, and worthy of a God. Stands he not thereby in the centre of immensities, in the conflux of eternities? He feels; power has been given him to know, to believe; nay does not the spirit of love, free in its celestial primeval brightness, even here, though but for a moment, look through? Well said St. Chrysostom, with his lips of gold, 'the true Shekinah is man'; where else is the God's-presence manifested not to our eyes only, but to our hearts, as in our fellowman?"—*Carlyle*.

SERMON.

"When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained, what is man, that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou visitest him?"

"For thou hast made him but little lower than God and crownest him with glory and honor. Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet,"—*Psalms* 8: 3-6.

IT HAS been made an oft repeated objection to Christianity, an objection common to both ancient and modern thought, that the vastness, the inconceivable immensity of the material universe, renders it very unlikely that God deigns to notice man, or that He makes him the object of any such redemption and minute providential care as the Bible reveals to us. The scale of His administration and its colossal concerns, are supposed to be of altogether too great a magnitude for Him to have any thought respecting the little needs and activities of men.

At first thought, the marvels of nature as revealed by modern science, seem to support the objection. How little we realize, how little can we realize what to us seems the infinite projection of the universe! Inconceivable immensities piled upon inconceivable immensities, and then multiplied by inconceivable immensities; how utterly bewildering and transcendent the thought! how far beyond the utmost reach of our understanding! If mathematics comes to our aid with a wilderness of figures, it is only to make a little more systematic and intelligible our own inability, and the impotence of our thought. How little we can comprehend the distances and immensities of our own little planetary system! It is only as figures are translated into familiar terms of comparison, that we can form even approximate conceptions of reality. Thus we say the moon, our nearest neighbor, is but two hundred and forty thousand miles from the earth. You think you know how far that is, as it is only about ten times the circumference of the earth, not far enough, indeed, to make a good measuring line for other distances. But when you know that a railway train, traveling at the rate of 600 miles every twenty-four hours, will be more than a year in going from the earth to the moon, you will be likely to consider that, after all, you had no adequate idea of the distance. But the sun, which is almost four hundred times farther off, could not be reached by that train until after

the lapse of more than four centuries; while the planet Neptune, which is thirty times as far from the sun as our earth is, could only be reached after thirty times four centuries, or twice as long a time as man has had a historical existence upon the earth.

Some such standards of measurement must be resorted to in order to have any real conception of the immense distances in our own solar system which, though vast and quite inconceivable, are yet, relatively to other systems, truly infinitesimal. Take for illustration, Sir John Herschel's "imaginary orrery."

We are to suppose ourselves on a level plain, in the centre of which we place a globe, two feet in diameter, to represent the sun. At the distance of two hundred and sixteen feet from this globe we place a pea, which figures the earth 8,000 miles in diameter; with the moon, under the form of a mustard seed, seven inches from the pea. Between the earth and the sun, at distances of about eighty-one and one hundred and forty-one feet from the latter, Mercury and Venus would be placed, the former as a small shot, the latter as a pea a little smaller than the earth. Mars would be another small shot, three hundred and twenty-seven feet from the centre; Jupiter and Saturn, oranges of moderate size, the former a quarter of a mile, and the latter two-fifths of a mile, from the sun; while Uranus and Neptune would be plums, at distances of three-quarters of a mile and a mile and a quarter respectively. Put in the asteroids and satellites in their proper places on the same scale, and the circular field of two miles and a half diameter would then be a tolerably exact map of our solar system, the little celestial family to which this planet of ours belongs.

This scale seems convenient enough with reference to our own little system, but it breaks down utterly when we try to bring into view the nearest neighbors of planetary systems outside. Sirius put down in his right place would have to be at least thirty thousand miles away from the two-foot globe representing the sun; and this distance, do not forget, is merely "to scale," the earth being a pea. The real distance of Sirius from the earth is so prodigious that light, which travels seven times around the earth in a second, and which reaches us in only eight minutes from the sun, would require no less than sixteen years in which to push its way across the mighty chasm which lies between that star and us. Using the diameter of the earth's orbit, 190,000,000 miles, as a base-line to measure displacement, it is discovered that the nearest fixed star, Alpha Centauri, cannot be nearer than one hundred thousand times 190,000,000 of miles; the double star 61 Cygni is at a distance of three hundred thousand

times 190,000,000 of miles; while the Pole Star is five times as remote—or fifteen hundred thousand times 190,000,000 of miles. When the mariner and the fugitive have looked gratefully to this star for guidance, their eyes have greeted a light which has been forty-six years in coming to them for that purpose, even though it has traveled at the steady-going pace of 192,000 miles a second.

But compare some of these mighty suns with our own. Alpha, if brought as near as our sun, would give twice as much light. Sirius is equal in light to sixty-three of our suns, while the Pole Star is equal to eighty-six. Think of it! What would be “so rare as a day in June,” under the quickening influences of an eighty-fold sun! But this is a mere trifle as compared with some others. Vega for instance, blazes with the light of three hundred and forty-four suns; Capella with the light of four hundred and thirty; Arcturus, with the light of five hundred and sixteen; and Alcyone—how can we comprehend it—with the light of twelve thousand! Quench the fires of this mighty luminary at this very moment, and for more than seven centuries it would still be a glittering star in the heavens. Our own sun we hardly regard as insignificant. Its bulk would nearly fill the orbit of the moon, while its weight is eight hundred times as much as all the rest of the solar system put together. But great as it is, it is but a glow worm when compared to other luminaries, and beside them would be absolutely invisible by reason of the overcoming splendor of these mightier suns.

And when we push out into the farther heavens and see Hercules two thousand years away as light travels; or one of the border stars of our nebula—the Milky Way—with its orbit of one hundred million of years, or the nebula of Andromeda, just visible to the naked eye, whose light as it greets us now, must have started on its course across the void one million of years ago; when we see bodies revolving about a common centre to form satellite systems; when we see satellite systems revolving about a common centre to form sun systems; when we see sun systems revolving about a common centre to form group systems; when we see group systems revolving about a common centre to form cluster systems; when we see cluster systems revolving about a common centre to form nebula systems; when we see nebula systems revolving about a common centre to form ulterior systems; when we see ulterior systems revolving about a common centre to form an ultimate system; when we see this ultimate system revolving about a common centre—shall we call it the celestial sphere where is the throne of God, the Elysian abode of the blest? we know not—when we see, I say, this universe

system sweeping on through infinite space in its mighty and resistless course of myriads of ages, what can we do but exclaim with the Psalmist, "What is man that Thou art mindful of him, or the son of man that Thou visitest him!" When we know that eighteen million suns belong to our firmament; when we know that there are more than four thousand such firmaments visible; when we have every reason to believe that had we sufficient telescopic power these myriad suns would be seen to be but the fringe on the heavenly garment of God, "shall He who telleth the number of the stars, who calleth them all by their names," who "binds the sweet influences of Pleiades and looses the bands of Orion," who "brings forth Mazzaroth in his season, and guides Arcturus with his sons"—shall He deign to notice man and to attend him by a providence so minute as to number even the hairs of his head?

At first thought, so overwhelming are these immensities and distances that we are wont to cry out instinctively, "What is man that God can be mindful of him, or the son of man that He can visit him!" But values are not measured by size or distance. Even the mind of the Psalmist, overcome for a moment with the grandeur of the heavens, recovers itself at once, for he follows immediately with the words, "Thou hast made him but little lower than God, and crownest him with glory and honor. Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of Thy hands. Thou hast put all things under his feet." It is related of Mrs. Siddons that when some one, looking with her at grand mountain scenery, made the remark, "How insignificant man seems here!" she replied, "I have no such feeling." And she was right. So clearly did she perceive the glory and honor which God has put upon man, that even in the midst of the vastness and sublimity of the mountains, she could realize his rightful pre-eminence.

It is the purpose of the hour to show, that such is the dignity and worth of man, that it is not derogatory to the infinite perfections of the Almighty, in the midst of the sublime splendors of the universe, to deign to notice him, and to visit him with the special marks of His interest and concern.

I. One supreme evidence of this, let us say, is to be found in the very nature of man. Man, we are told, is made in the image of God; and the Psalmist lifts up our thought to something of the meaning of this when he says, "For Thou hast made him but little lower than God, and crownest him with glory and honor." There is something of divinity, therefore, in every man. He is truly God-like. And in what respect? Not that he has a body with flesh and blood and bones, for

this is made of the same dust that planets are made of: but in this; that he has the attributes of personality, he has power to think, he has power to choose, he has power to feel. And this it is which makes man worth more than a world, or any system of worlds. There is a mighty sun out there in space, blazing with a light which is a thousand years away from us, and yet it has no thought; it does not know that it exists. It has no power of choice. Its furnace fires must glow and burn, and its prodigious bulk must wheel itself in space, with no possibility of doing otherwise. It is a mere puppet in the clutch of law. Nor, again, has it any power to feel. It cannot be touched with emotion. It has no play of sensibility. Joy and hope and enthusiasm and aspiration are totally unknown, and must be forever strangers to it. It is as insensate, as incapable of intelligence, as the dust which man grinds under his heel. "Man is but a reed," says Pascal, "the feeblest thing in nature; but he is a reed that thinks. It needs not that the universe arm itself to crush him. An exhalation, a drop of water, suffices to destroy him. But were the universe to crush him, man is yet nobler than the universe, for he knows that he dies; and the universe, even in prevailing against him, knows not its power."

Is not the dignity of man exalted by the very narrowness of that stage on which he moves? The universe is impressive by reason of the vastness upon which it is projected; but man, hemmed in to a minute sphere, is yet capable of piercing the universe with his knowledge, of thinking God's thoughts after him, is under obligation to the same moral law, finds his knowledge conditioned upon the same necessary truths, is able to comprehend in some measure, the Infinite Being with all His absolute perfections, and like Him, to know the meaning of love and joy and holiness and eternal life.

Nor does man ever fall so low that this divinity of nature is ever lost. Here is a court of justice, and a man is on trial for the supposed guilt of murder. He is brutal in his instincts, and schooled in every form of villainy and crime. At once the whole community is stirred. Day after day the court room is crowded. A breathless interest pervades it. The most careful and painstaking researches are made into the evidence. Every point of advantage is contested with all the power of argument and law. Eloquence makes her utmost plea; and when at last the jury files into the court room, and the foreman rises to announce the verdict upon which trembles the fate of a human life, a stillness like the silence of death pervades the assembly. And why is all this, except that it is the instinctive tribute of man to the dignity and importance of his fellow-man, however much he may have de-

faced his God-given nature by the violence of crime? But even of wayward and self-destroying man it must be said, that in nature he is made but little lower than divinity, and is clothed with glory and honor. By this very fact, how far he transcends in interest and value the heavens, the work of God's fingers, and the moon and the stars which he has ordained!

II. But the truth we are contending for is seen not only in the nature, but also in the achievements of man, and in his conquest of the natural world. "Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands, thou hast put all things under his feet." How true this is as seen in the life of the world to-day, and in a sense which the Psalmist never dreamed of! Man seizes upon the elements of nature and makes them do his bidding. Water, fire, earth, stone, ore, gas, wood, wind, lightning—all are yoked to use and made to serve his purpose. By the power of steam he drives the iron horse across the continent, sends the freighted ship across the sea, turns all the shafting of the mills and factories of the world. He levies upon forest, quarry and mine, and builds great cities and splendid temples and enduring monuments. He tunnels through mountains and under rivers, and makes of a great continent an island. He predicts the pathway of the storm and provides against it. He harnesses the wind to the sails of commerce, or makes it propel the machinery of use. If drought parches his field, he makes the unwilling heavens yield to his desire in fruitful showers. He even lifts himself two or three miles above the earth and, jumping from his balloon, reaches the earth in safety. Though he no longer lashes the Hellespont in futile anger because it destroyed a bridge, he yet has so far subdued the sea as to travel its proud waves more safely than the land, and practically to annihilate distance. He grasps the thunder-bolt in his hand, and compels it to obedience as a motor, or makes it send his thought in electric speech around the globe. He looks upon the rocks and reads there the long story of cosmic ages, and marks clearly "The Footprints of the Creator." With his microscope he looks into a world too small to be seen by the naked eye, and yet articulates it and creates a science for it. With his telescope he looks upon suns and systems of suns too far out in space to be seen by the naked eye, and yet, he calculates their size, catalogues their substances, determines their orbits and discovers that the entire visible universe is formed of the same primary materials, possesses a similar chemical nature, and obeys the same chemical laws. Yea more; by recent astronomical discoveries he is able to locate, to measure, to weigh, and even chemically to analyze stars which he has never seen, and which in all

probability will forever remain invisible to the human eye. And when we see him slowly but surely wresting from nature her primeval secrets, and building up the sciences which interpret the universe; when we see him making literature that is immortal; when we see him creating art so true and pure as "to hold the mirror up to nature;" when we see him establishing governments and founding institutions which conserve the needs and the loftiest aspirations of the race, do we not see that man is no mere trifle in the universe, but that the universe itself, with all its immensities, has significance only as it has relation to rational being? No wonder that Shakespeare makes Hamlet exclaim, "What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god!"

III. But the truth we are considering is further sustained by the boundless capacities of man for development. The sun shines no more brightly than when Adam first, hailed its glorious light. The starry firmament is no more brilliant in diadems than when the ancient astrologers sought to tell its secrets. The ocean is not more grand than when the old Phœnicians plied it with their oars. Nature is not more beautiful than when the bowers of Eden spread their charms. But man! what possibilities of development lie in him! and how much has actually been realized in individual and national and world history! Compare Saul of Tarsus with Paul at Athens; the child Newton and his toy, with Sir Isaac Newton and his telescope; Gladstone the school-boy at Eton, with Gladstone the statesman, the greatest man living. Compare England of to-day, with England when Cæsar landed on its shores. Compare America of to-day, with the America which Columbus discovered. Compare modern governments with their parliaments and courts of justice, with the tyrannies and despotisms of ancient times. Compare modern civilizations, with their enlightenment, their appliances, their humane and Christian spirit, with the crude social state and barbarisms and superstitions of antiquity. And how marvelously, from age to age, the bounderies of human knowledge have been extended! What were the frontiers of yesterday, are being passed to-day, and will be left far behind to-morrow. What a mere alphabet was the old astrology to our modern astronomy, or the old alchemy to our modern chemistry! Not only have we had new revelations from time to time, but they have often had the power of revolutions. New sciences and new systems of thought have grown up within the present century, and almost within the present generation. The sum total of human knowledge at the close of the nineteenth century, will only be a good primer to the sum total of human know-

ledge at the close of the twentieth century. Prof. Huxley is supposed to know a great deal about the natural world, and yet he confesses that we are only "at the beginning of our knowledge of nature and not at the end of it." Is it a slight thing, therefore, that while the natural world shows no improvement, and is no more perfect now than when the morning stars first sang together, man, on the other hand, moves on in a course of ceaseless development, constantly reaching higher planes of thought and life and action? Suns must burn themselves out, and at last become cold and dead; but man—are not the eternal years of God all his? And shall God count the fading stars, and not visit the growing man, the heir of immortality, expanding his thought and enriching his life throughout all the ages of eternity?

IV. But a further confirmation of the worth of man is to be seen in the incarnate son of God, the ideal man—Jesus of Nazareth. What a supreme glory does it put upon man, that heaven stooped to earth and gave up its holiest and mightiest One, that He might take upon himself our common humanity, with all its needs and limitations and exposures! If God were to visit man as some resplendent archangel, attended by chariots of fire and clouds of splendor, paling even the fires of the sun in the greater radiance of His own appearing, this would indeed be an unspeakable distinction, past all our power to utter its meaning. But incomparably beyond all this is the supreme fact that God visits man by entering into his own nature and conditions, opening His eyes upon the world in a lowly nativity, toiling and thirsting with him, suffering and enduring with him, rejoicing and weeping with him, buffeted by the same temptations, and attended by the same needs and liabilities. But more than this. This Immanuel stilled the tempest, walked upon the troubled waves, banished disease and infirmity by the word of command, and recalled to their bodily tenements the spirits of the dead. But most of all, there was throughout the beauty, the grandeur of a stainless, perfect life. The world has seen its own humanity consecrated and glorified in one ideal man; not because man, by dint of his own effort, reached up to a perfect standard, but because divinity possessed him, and his nature is forever more clothed with the lustre of a divine glory.

And note, too, upon what a narrow stage this supreme manifestation was displayed! Does the fact that it was connected with only two small provinces, Galilee and Judea, on a small planet lost in the vastness of the universe, in any way belittle your estimate of the transcendent glory of that manifestation? Is not the greatness of Jesus essentially of a different order than that of constellations? If we were

to see the life work of Jesus wrought out upon a theatre of gigantic proportions, it would add absolutely nothing to our conception of its beauty and worth, or of its essential dignity and power. When God is so mindful of man as to visit him by embodying in him His own divine nature and glory, what are firmaments and all the splendor of them, compared to an exaltation of dignity and privilege so divine!

V. But if "the Word made flesh" emphasizes the worth of man, even more does the supreme act which consummates redemption. It means much that divinity stoops to man, but it means even more that it stoops to death. Is it not a marvelous thing that heaven's mighty Prince, though in the form of God, should count it not a prize to be on equality with God, but among all the myriads of mighty worlds should seek out man on this little sphere, lost, as it were, almost in the immensities of the universe? It is even so. But at the same time, how wondrously does this display the relative place of man in the universe, in that he is sought out in his little corner of immensity and a divine sacrifice is offered up in his behalf! God could not so visit a star. There would be no interests to be touched, or values to be conserved by it. But that which called the Son of God to His passion and His cross, must be of inconceivable worth, beyond all power of starry worlds to express.

If such be the thought and estimate of God we ought to realize that no man, made in His image and so visited, can ever fall so low, or so abuse his birthright, as to be beneath the reach of our kindly sympathy and outstretched hand to save. He is God's child; a wayward child to be sure, but still His child. It is ours, if we may, to lead him home.

How greatly, too, does the dignity which God puts upon man in the physical universe, strengthen our confidence in the unfailing goodness and loving kindness of our Father! He who is more mindful of man than the firmament of blazing worlds, may be trusted for an all-comprehending watch-care and wisdom and love; and they who yield their hearts to Him in entire surrender, shall at last stand before Him in the beauty of perfected life,

"When suns are cold,
And stars are old,
And the leaves of the judgment books unfold."



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